

A Letter on Justice and Open Debate

Adjust Share

July 7, 2020

The below letter will be appearing in the Letters section of the magazine's October issue. We welcome responses at letters@harpers.org

Our cultural institutions are facing a moment of trial. Powerful protests for racial and social justice are leading to overdue demands for police reform, along with wider calls for greater equality and inclusion across our society, not least in higher education, journalism, philanthropy, and the arts. But this needed reckoning has also intensified a new set of moral attitudes and political commitments that tend to weaken our norms of open debate and toleration of differences in favor of ideological conformity. As we applaud the first development, we also raise our voices against the second. The forces of illiberalism are gaining strength throughout the world and have a powerful ally in Donald Trump, who represents a real threat to democracy. But resistance must not be allowed to harden into its own brand of dogma or coercion—which right-wing demagogues are already exploiting. The democratic inclusion we want can be achieved only if we speak out against the intolerant climate that has set in on all sides.

The free exchange of information and ideas, the lifeblood of a liberal society, is daily becoming more constricted. While we have come to expect this on the radical right, censoriousness is also spreading more widely in our culture: an intolerance of opposing views, a vogue for public shaming and ostracism, and the tendency to dissolve complex policy issues in a blinding moral certainty. We uphold the value of robust and even caustic counter-speech from all quarters. But it is now all too common to hear calls for swift and severe retribution in response to perceived transgressions of speech and thought. More troubling still, institutional leaders, in a spirit of panicked damage control, are delivering hasty and disproportionate punishments instead of considered reforms. Editors are fired for running controversial pieces; books are withdrawn for alleged inauthenticity; journalists are barred from writing on certain topics; professors are investigated for quoting works of literature in class; a researcher is fired for circulating a peer-reviewed academic study; and the heads of organizations are ousted for what are sometimes just clumsy mistakes. Whatever the arguments around each particular incident, the result has been to steadily narrow the boundaries of what can be said without the threat of reprisal. We are already paying the price in greater risk aversion among writers, artists, and journalists who fear for their livelihoods if they depart from the consensus, or even lack sufficient zeal in agreement.

This stifling atmosphere will ultimately harm the most vital causes of our time. The restriction of debate, whether by a repressive government or an intolerant society, invariably hurts those who lack power and makes everyone less capable of democratic participation. The way to defeat bad ideas is by exposure, argument, and persuasion, not by trying to silence or wish them away. We refuse any false choice between justice and freedom, which cannot exist without each other. As writers we need a culture that leaves us room for experimentation, risk taking, and even mistakes. We need to preserve the possibility of good-faith disagreement without dire professional consequences. If we won't defend the very thing on which our work depends, we shouldn't expect the public or the state to defend it for us.

- Elliot Ackerman**
Saladin Ambar, Rutgers University
Martin Amis
Anne Applebaum
Marie Arana, author
Margaret Atwood
John Banville
Mia Bay, historian
Louis Begley, writer
Roger Berkowitz, Bard College
Paul Berman, writer
Sheri Berman, Barnard College
Reginald Dwayne Betts, poet
Neil Blair, agent
David W. Blight, Yale University
Jennifer Finney Boylan, author
David Bromwich
David Brooks, columnist
Ian Buruma, Bard College
Lea Carpenter
Noam Chomsky, MIT (emeritus)
Nicholas A. Christakis, Yale University
Roger Cohen, writer
Ambassador Frances D. Cook, ret.
Drucilla Cornell, Founder, uBuntu Project
Kamel Daoud
Meghan Daum, writer
Gerald Early, Washington University-St. Louis
Jeffrey Eugenides, writer
Dexter Filkins
Federico Finchelstein, The New School
Caitlin Flanagan
Richard T. Ford, Stanford Law School
Kmele Foster
David Frum, journalist
Francis Fukuyama, Stanford University
Atul Gawande, Harvard University
Todd Gitlin, Columbia University
Kim Ghattas
Malcolm Gladwell
Michelle Goldberg, columnist
Rebecca Goldstein, writer
Anthony Grafton, Princeton University
David Greenberg, Rutgers University
Linda Greenhouse
Rinne B. Groff, playwright
Sarah Haider, activist
Jonathan Haidt, NYU-Stern
Roya Hakakian, writer
Shadi Hamid, Brookings Institution
Susan Madrak, writer
Phoebe Maltz Bovy, writer
Greil Marcus
Wynton Marsalis, Jazz at Lincoln Center
Kati Marton, author
Debra Mashek, scholar
Deirdre McCloskey, University of Illinois at Chicago
John McWhorter, Columbia University
Uday Mehta, City University of New York
Andrew Moravcsik, Princeton University
Yascha Mounk, Persuasion
Samuel Moyn, Yale University
Meera Nanda, writer and teacher
Cary Nelson, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Olivia Nuzzi, New York Magazine
Mark Oppenheimer, Yale University
Dael Orlandersmith, writer/performer
George Packer
Nell Irvin Painter, Princeton University (emerita)
Greg Pardlo, Rutgers University – Camden
Orlando Patterson, Harvard University
Steven Pinker, Harvard University
Letty Cottin Pogrebin
Katha Pollitt, writer
Claire Bond Potter, The New School
Taufiq Rahim
Zia Haider Rahman, writer
Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, University of Wisconsin
Jonathan Rauch, Brookings Institution/The Atlantic
Neil Roberts, political theorist
Melvin Rogers, Brown University
Kat Rosenfield, writer
Loretta J. Ross, Smith College
J.K. Rowling
Salman Rushdie, New York University
Karim Sadjadpour, Carnegie Endowment
Daryl Michael Scott, Howard University
Diana Senechal, teacher and writer
Jennifer Senior, columnist
Judith Shulevitz, writer
Jesse Singal, journalist
Anne-Marie Slaughter
Andrew Solomon, writer
Deborah Solomon, critic and biographer
Allison Stanger, Middlebury College
Paul Starr, American Prospect/Princeton University
Wendell Steavenson, writer

Jeet Heer, The Nation
Katie Herzog, podcast host
Susannah Heschel, Dartmouth College
Adam Hochschild, author
Arlie Russell Hochschild, author
Eva Hoffman, writer
Coleman Hughes, writer/Manhattan Institute
Hussein Ibish, Arab Gulf States Institute
Michael Ignatieff
Zaid Jilani, journalist
Bill T. Jones, New York Live Arts
Wendy Kaminer, writer
Matthew Karp, Princeton University
Garry Kasparov, Renew Democracy Initiative
Daniel Kehlmann, writer
Randall Kennedy
Khaled Khalifa, writer
Parag Khanna, author
Laura Kipnis, Northwestern University
Frances Kissling, Center for Health, Ethics,
Social Policy
Enrique Krauze, historian
Anthony Kronman, Yale University
Joy Ladin, Yeshiva University
Nicholas Lemann, Columbia University
Mark Lilla, Columbia University
Susie Linfield, New York University
Damon Linker, writer
Dahlia Lithwick, Slate
Steven Lukes, New York University
John R. MacArthur, publisher, writer

Gloria Steinem, writer and activist
Nadine Strossen, New York Law School
Ronald S. Sullivan Jr., Harvard Law School
Kian Tajbakhsh, Columbia University
Zephyr Teachout, Fordham University
Cynthia Tucker, University of South Alabama
Adaner Usmani, Harvard University
Chloe Valdary
Helen Vendler, Harvard University
Judy B. Walzer
Michael Walzer
Eric K. Washington, historian
Caroline Weber, historian
Randi Weingarten, American Federation of
Teachers
Bari Weiss
Sean Wilentz, Princeton University
Garry Wills
Thomas Chatterton Williams, writer
Robert F. Worth, journalist and author
Molly Worthen, University of North Carolina at
Chapel Hill
Matthew Yglesias
Emily Yoffe, journalist
Cathy Young, journalist
Fareed Zakaria

Institutions are listed for identification purposes only.